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An admiral for the CIA

It may be premature to judge the appointment of Adm. Stansfield Turner to head the CIA. But from all accounts, he seems to be the right man in the right place at the right time.

That Adm. Turner wasn't President Carter's first choice hardly diminishes his qualifications. Though the Sorensen nomination failed for all the wrong reasons, it was nonetheless a political pay-off. The former Kennedy aide's job would have been frustrated on that count alone. Besides, Mr. Carter quickly learned a priceless lesson about dealing with the Congress.

In fact, the Turner appointment illustrates how well the President has learned. As a military man with a brilliant career, the admiral will more than satisfy Senate conservatives that the sensitive CIA post is in safe hands. But as something of an iconoclast with a penchant for unorthodox ideas, he also should get the approval of Senate liberals who want a person of unimpeachable independence to head the CIA.

What reservations remain about Adm. Turner focus on two, equally important matters. The first is whether his military career gives him a bias that favors military over civilian intelligence estimates. The second involves his attitudes toward a range of issues, from CIA past abuses to the legitimacy of covert operations.

Concerning the first question, Adm. Turner not only has the reputation of being one of the Navy's most independent-minded officers, his recent Foreign Affairs quarterly analysis of U.S. naval strength puts him sharply at odds with the military establishment's characteristic approach to intelligence interpretation.

For example, Adm. Turner's article flatly rejects the notion that because the Soviets have more

ships than the United States, they therefore enjoy superior military capability on the seas. The admiral says such comparisons are nonsense. He argues, rather, that this nation's concern shouldn't be with statistics, but with how well certain ships perform the role for which they are built. In other words, Adm. Turner already takes a skeptical approach to military intelligence estimates and evaluations.

The second question deals with the other side of the same coin, specifically the CIA's own intelligence operations. On this Adm. Turner has made precious few public comments to provide the basis for even a tentative judgment of his attitudes. But both President Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance have strongly committed the administration to tight control over the CIA. Mr. Vance recently promised that covert operations would only be undertaken in highly unusual circumstances and always with strict accountability to the President.

If that's followed to the letter, it should mean no more CIA assassination plots, no more Bay of Pigs fiascos and no more CIA attempts to overthrow governments this nation doesn't like. It is, moreover, almost impossible to imagine the Carter administration making such a pledge and then not securing Adm. Turner's agreement before nominating him. At any rate, the Senate confirmation hearings should clear up any lingering doubts that the admiral will keep the agency from meddling in the internal affairs of another country, friend or foe.

Beyond that, Adm. Turner's main job is to make absolutely certain the President gets the most accurate intelligence possible. If he fails at that, his brilliance and his independence will count for nothing.